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*The House of Mirth*

In Edith Wharton’s *The House of Mirth,* marriage is viewed as more of a business arrangement rather than a lifelong bond formed by love. In this society, men and women are looked at as objects and have specific roles to fill when they are married. Especially for women who have little means of becoming financially independent during this time, it is assumed that marriage is their “vocation” and it is what they are “all brought up for” (9). The expected gender roles are that women are to have children and take care of the house while the men are to provide for their family monetarily. Rather than falling in love by chance, marriage is a carefully thought out business arrangement based on the value of each person. The value of a woman is based on age, beauty, and reputation. On the other hand, the value of a man is based almost solely on his wealth and the wealth of his family. I argue that women and men become objects in this society where marriage is seen as a business arrangement.

Women are most valued for their physical and social appearance in this society. A woman’s worth declines significantly as she ages. Wharton describes that Mrs. Bart died of “disgust” in large part because “her visions of brilliant marriage for Lily had faded after the first year” (35). Lily worried that she had failed because “she was nine-and-twenty, and still Miss Bart” (38). Beauty is another major factor when considering a woman’s value in this society as shown by the pressure Mrs. Bart puts on Lily to marry into wealth and “get it all back” with her “face” (28). Beyond a woman’s physical appearance, she is also valued by her reputation. Lily shows that she is always keeping her reputation in mind when she considers going into her friend Selden’s apartment a “risk” if people were to find out about it (6). After realizing she had been caught coming from Selden’s rooms and that it would significantly affect her reputation, she wonders why a girl must “pay so dearly for her least escape from routine” (15). Throughout *The House of Mirth,* the importance of reputation pertaining to the value of women is evident because the reader is constantly being updated with what the latest rumors on Lily and the other women of society are. While a good reputation is vital to a woman’s value, reputation has little effect on the value of a man. When making the decision to keep the letters, Lily considers the effect it will have on Selden and comes to the conclusion that “men do not, at worst, suffer much from such exposure” (105). While age, beauty, and reputation do not significantly impact a man’s value, a man’s value depends solely on his wealth and the wealth of his family line. For example, when Lily’s father lost his job, “to his wife he no longer counted” and Lilly found it to be a “relief” when he died (33).

Men and women in this society became objects in the business of marriage. The values placed on men and women coincide with their predetermined gender roles when it comes to marriage. Women are valued for their age, beauty, and reputation because they are expected to bear children, please their husbands, and maintain a respectable household. Men are valued exclusively by their wealth because their role in the marriage is to pay the bills and allow their families to live comfortably. The society in *The House of Mirth* has overlooked the importance of love in a marriage and has therefore made people into objects being matched by superficial standards.